

PRESIDENT LYNDON JOHNSON AND THE DYNAMICS OF MILITARY  
INTERVENTION IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, 1965

President Lyndon Johnson and the Dynamics of Military Intervention in the Dominican  
Republic, 1965

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## ABSTRACT

Although many disciplines have contributed to scholarly understanding of the United States (U.S.) intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965, military science and intelligence studies have lagged in influence. Too many recent accounts of the Dominican Civil War, also called the April Revolution, have undervalued the wealth of primary sources on the subject, including Central Intelligence Agency declassified documents revealing key variables shaping the military dynamics, threats, operational conditions, environment, and other relevant factors including President Lyndon Johnson's decision-making on the crisis. Rather than subjective approaches, DOTmLPF-P Analysis--an acronym for doctrine, organization, training, material, leadership and education, personnel, facilities-and policy—serves as an effective structured approach for analyzing the variables or dynamics driving the U.S. Presidential administration and strategy for this tropical island where vying political forces collided on April 24, 1965, and thereby triggered the President's decision to intervene by deploying U.S. military forces.

This paper will assert that President Lyndon Johnson acted upon sound policy, leadership principles, doctrine regarding countering Communist aggression in the Dominican Republic, decision-making relying on the reporting of his Country Team and critical tactical developments, and well-trained military personnel aptly readied for rapid and complex intervention, a preparation made possible by President John F. Kennedy during his administration. A brief analysis of the consequences of the intervention will provide further insights into the successful achievement of the President's Caribbean security policy.

*Keywords:* Dominican Civil War 1965, Communist insurgency Dominican Republic

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On April 24, 1965, “the dark mist of conflict and violence, revolution and confusion,” as President Lyndon Johnson called it, arrived on his horizon (Johnson, Public Papers, May 1965, p. 469). Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs Thomas Mann had informed the Commander-in-Chief a coup in the Dominican Republic was underway, a scenario implying the unrest could threaten not only the tenuous regime of its President, Donald Reid Cabral, but also United States policy seeking security and the development of the democratic and economic potential of the region.

U.S.- Dominican Republic policy under Johnson rested on a volatile island of Communist aggression, right wing militarism, debilitated and conflicted non-Communist politics, and widespread poverty, social disorder, and government corruption, all infused with pressures from Washington requiring the necessary U.S. security interests and the prevention of “another Cuba,” a term used frequently by the President and his administration. Subsequently, President Lyndon Johnson chose to intervene militarily in the Dominican Republic transforming evacuation operations to military intervention codenamed Operation Powerpack in order to stabilize the country, prevent an imminent Communist takeover, and support humanitarian aid to the suffering people of that nation.

This paper will assert that President Lyndon Johnson acted upon sound policy, leadership principles, doctrine regarding countering Communist aggression in the Dominican Republic, decision-making relying on the reporting of his Country Team and critical tactical developments, and well-trained military personnel aptly readied for rapid and complex intervention, a preparation made possible by President John F. Kennedy during his administration. The combination of factors created successful strategic outcomes. A brief analysis of the

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consequences of the intervention will provide further insights into the achievement of the President's Caribbean security policy.



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### Not Another Cuba

*If the situation described above comes to pass, my own recommendation and that of country team is that we should intervene to prevent another Cuba from arising out of the ashes of this uncontrollable situation.*

-Telegram From the Embassy in the Dominican Republic to the Director of the National Security Agency (Carter),  
Santo Domingo, April 28, 1965 (FRUS, 1964-1968, Vol. XXXII, p.85).

President Lyndon Johnson's Caribbean policy both legitimized and prioritized the defense of U.S. security interests, including the relevant security situations arising in the Dominican Republic, a priority given little if any validity among modern scholars addressing the

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Dominican Civil War. In the shadow of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 which brought the U.S. and Soviet Union to the brink of nuclear war, Cuba's regional intrigue was rightly given much attention in the President's intelligence briefings and decision-making during the onset of the Dominican Crisis (CIA, PDB, March 16, 1965, p.p.5-6). Fidel Castro's totalitarian island had become not just the temporary platform of Soviet offensive nuclear missiles that he advocated for annihilation of the U.S if it invaded Cuba, "however harsh and terrible the solution would be"—evidence of the scope and severity of the Cuban threat (Castro, Letter to Premier Khrushchev, October 26, 1962). Cuba also had become the primary platform for regionally exporting revolution, subversion, propaganda, arms, funding, unrest, and training Communist leaders and guerrilla forces including those infiltrating the Dominican Republic (CIA NIE: The Situation and Prospects in Cuba, August 1, 1962).

The successor of John F. Kennedy determined not to allow "another Cuba" to arise and threaten US security and economic interests. Bound by his Presidential oath, Constitutional law, and the emotional experiences of the gripping ExComm meetings of the Kennedy Administration during the Cuban Missile Crisis (Coleman). Johnson consequently asserted the defense of U.S. security objectives in the Dominican Republic with authority and conviction.

I want you to know and I want the world to know that as long as I am President of this country, we are going to defend ourselves. We will defend our soldiers against attackers. We will honor our treaties. We will keep our commitments. We will defend our Nation against all those who seek to destroy not only the U.S. but every free country of this hemisphere. We do not want to bury anyone as I have said so many times before. But we do not intend to be buried (Johnson, Public Papers, May 1965, p. 474).

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The alleged contradiction of U.S. policy objectives promoting self-determination of the Dominican Republic and at the same time the very military juntas that opposed democratically elected President Juan Bosch existed as an inconsistency for critics but not Johnson. Bosch and his Constitutional movement, the latter which led the coup in April 1965, had become infiltrated, influenced, and even co-opted by the Dominican Communists whom Castro had backed so effectively (CIA, *The Communist Role in the Dominican Rebel Movement*, 16-27 MAY 1965). The intertwined and inseparable threads of malign Marxism and popular reformism were the very materials Castro had woven together to cloak his rise to power. Johnson did not tolerate such political developments in the Dominican Republic, having learned the hard lessons of the Communist conquest of Cuba.

Additionally, Johnson and his administration considered Bosch weak, ineffective, opportunistic, and an outright facilitator of the burgeoning growth of the Communist infrastructure on the island—a subject treated in detail later in this paper. He lacked, as the President noted, “the capacity to unite under his leadership the various elements that wanted progress and constitutional government” (Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 1971, p.189 ). Supporting this view were Congressman Strom Thurmond, notable liberals in the U.S., the State Department, former U.S. Ambassador to the Dominican Republic Phelps Phelps, and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA, *The Truth About Bosch*, 1966).

Yet again, Dominican Republic General Elias Wessin y Wessin, who was responsible for the ouster of Bosch in 1963, underscored not only the complicity of his relationship with Communists on the island but also his tolerance of the rapid build-up of the Communist infrastructure there. Wessin’s testimony during the Congressional Hearings of 1965 detailed the

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rapidity of this organizational growth as well as the tolerance of the former President toward these subversive activities (Wessin, Congressional Hearings, October 1, 1965, p.p. 15-30). Given the corroboration of other sources such as the Papal Nuncio, CIA, and Communist sources revealed decades later, the testimony of the general remains valuable for its context and tactical insights (Jacobs, 2021).

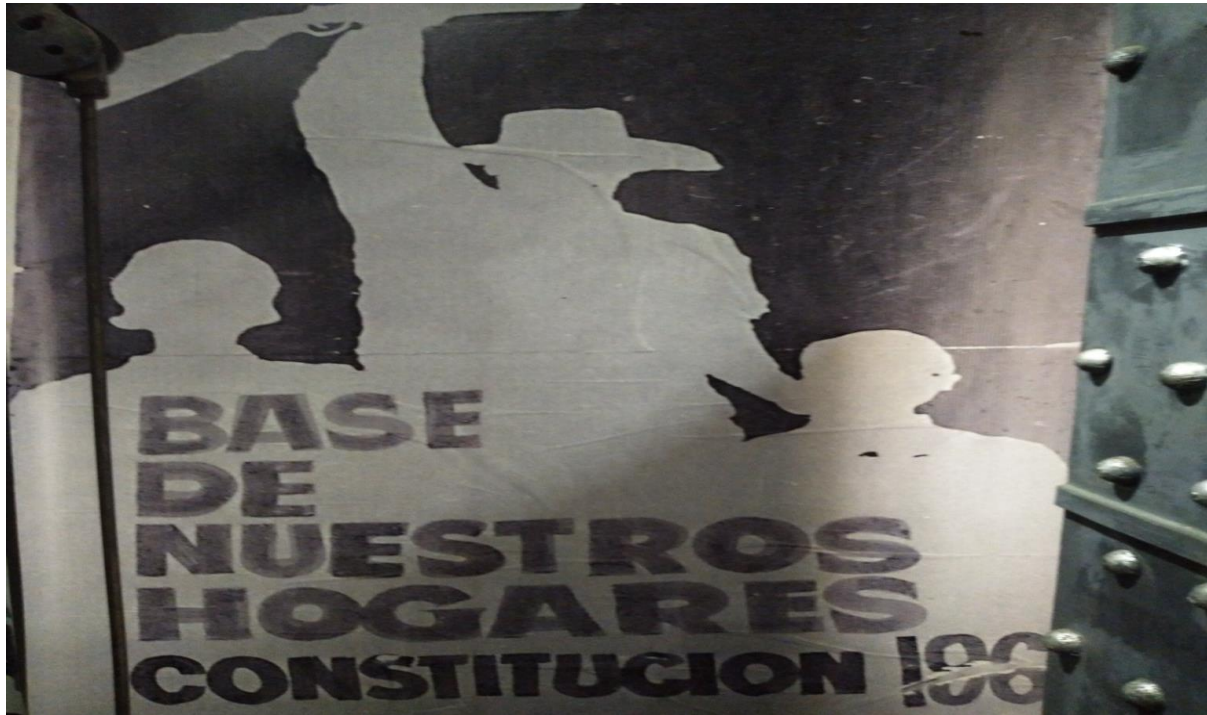
Also, President Johnson's policy for the Dominican Republic was rooted in realism, not the abstract constructs created in international relations theory but the realities or dynamics shaping national life on the island. The destructive aftermath of the oppressive regime of Rafael Trujillo (assassinated in May 1961) creating social unrest, the normalization of violent political practices, and anti-Americanism; the decline of sugar markets causing economic downturns for the country; the incapacity of the security forces politicized, factionalized, and also disrupted by resistance to President Reid's military reforms and ensuing incapacity; and the increasing capabilities of Communist forces creating a preponderance of power, all influenced the policy, determinants, and decisions to intervene in 1965 to stabilize the Dominican Republic (FRUS, 1964-1968, Vol. XXXII, p.p. 61-61).

### The Communist Threat in the Dominican Republic

In addition to policy, President Lyndon Johnson's decision to intervene militarily in the Dominican Republic occurred in large part because of the effective intelligence reporting of the CIA, Department of State, and Department of Defense that underscored the island's malign Communist infrastructure, organization, operations, capabilities, and threats vis a vis the limited capabilities of the Dominican security forces and Constitutional parties. Simply stated: the

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Commander-in-Chief understood by his intelligence reporting the small but militant Communist organizations could potentially take over the country during such a period of instability as the Dominican Crisis of 1965. Consequently, he effectively led the U.S. through the crisis by acting on accurate intelligence (Jacobs, 2021).



"The 1963 Constitution: foundation of our family," a propaganda poster by the Cultural Front during Dominican Crisis of 1965

The President's discussions during the crisis reflected the major themes of this reporting as well as key tactical aspects of the Communist threat--the latter a critical component of effective decision-making. His high-profile speeches, meetings, and writings referenced Cuban support, highly trained insurgent and subversive militant leadership exercising operational control over the rebellion and paramilitary units, crowd manipulation tactics, and mass weapons distribution to the population, all occurring during a period of government and military



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breakdown (Johnson, Public Papers, May 1965, p.p. 461-491). He later noted in his Presidential memoirs a keen tactical understanding of the depth and severity of the conditions potentially leading to a Communist takeover:

The situation in the streets of the Dominican capital was alarming. Our Embassy reported that guns had been passed out at random—many to Communist organizers, who were putting them into the hands of their followers: others to thugs and criminals, the so-called Tigres. Young boys of twelve and thirteen were swaggering around the streets with machine guns over their shoulders. Stores and houses were being looted.

The Tigres were making a specialty of killing policemen, and this had promoted most police officers to shed their uniforms and go into hiding. Law and order had broken down. Seizure of police stations put more weapons into the hands of the rebels (Johnson, Vantage Point, 1971, p.191).

The origins and early developments of Communism in the Dominican Republic occurred during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) when Communist subversives arrived and immediately began to develop a viable infrastructure over the course of years--facts reported in depth by the CIA (CIA, Communism in the Dominican Republic, July 19, 1965, p.p.1-3). Well-trained militants, including one who later led “the rebels” during the Dominican Crisis of 1965, infiltrated the island and rapidly created front groups, publications, and basic recruitment platforms. Occurring afterward were the growth of cells, an underground, area coverage (at the provincial level), diverse propaganda platforms, key positions in national life (political, security, social, and economic), and linkage to regional Communist strongholds--including Cuba as it rose in prominence in the movement by the late 1950s and early 1960s.

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The durability of the Communist infrastructure in the Dominican Republic became evident in its organizational growth and complexity, influence in national life, and resiliency during government crackdowns. During government counter-measures to the Communist movement, which occurred throughout its history on the island, many of these skilled operators went underground, or exfiltrated to Cuba--where sanctuary, funding, training, and operational support was given-- and often returned later with renewed capabilities through well-developed infiltration routes assisted by the Cuban government and particularly its General Directorate of Intelligence and the Cuban navy (CIA, Threats in the Dominican Republic, November 19, 1966).

Even though the Cuban invasion of the Dominican Republic--using combined air and maritime operations failed in June 1959, as did other similar operations in Haiti, Nicaragua, and Panama, the Communist infrastructure on the island endured. The failed Communist uprising of 1963 on the island, no doubt another setback of these Marxist insurgents, likewise demonstrated the resilience of the infrastructure as well as the determination of its personnel.

Cuban support to Communist organizations in the Dominican Republic complemented but did not dominate the insurgent infrastructure created on this volatile tropical island. The sanctuary, training, logistical support, lethal aide, funding, and direct personnel augmentation provided by Communist Cuba to its indigenous Dominican counterparts demonstrated the strategic skill necessary to create viable national movements rather than dependent proxies (Houska, 1967). Understanding the delicate balance of foreign support and indigenous growth of insurgent organizations is critical for assessing the very threat the three major Marxist revolutionary organizations posed to stability and peace on the island. Not surprisingly, the three major Communist organizations operating during the crisis—the Fourteenth of June Party

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[APCJ-the largest of the three], Marxist Leninist Dominican Popular Movement [MPD], Dominican Popular Socialist Party [PSPD]--not only performed effectively but also rapidly took control of the rebel forces and provided a viable structure to the uprising when other anti-government elements collapsed under the contending forces vying for control of national life (CIA, The Communist Role in the Dominican Rebel Movement, 16-27 May 1965).

Operation Manuel, the Czechoslovak intelligence operations during the period assisting infiltration and exfiltration of Latin American Communist and anti-American nationalists throughout Latin America through Cuba was critical for facilitating that country's support for the Dominican Communist infrastructure. The opened archives from the former Czechoslovakia revealed a document on the operation which supports CIA assessments (Houska, 1967).

In addition to the revelation of document forgeries, covert movements, front groups for movements, rating of trainees according to reliability, debriefing problems, and typical operational and reporting challenges, key aspects of the operation were evident. Cuba had prioritized rather than normalized the training of the Dominican Republic revolutionaries, allotting to it the second highest number of personnel among 22 target nations. Cuba had also trained large number of anti-American nationalists for guerrilla warfare, including those who had formerly resisted Communist parties. As importantly, the malign objectives were also clearly stated: the training of revolutionary cadres and organization of combat groups to overthrow non-Communist governments:

The main objective of the operation is the education and training of revolutionary cadres from Latin American countries and the organization of combat groups, capable of independent operations in their country. The Cuban friends proceed from the principle of

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the need to give maximum support to all forms of struggle, leading to the liberation of the Latin American nations (Houska, 1967).

The Communist organizations of the Dominican Republic demonstrated notable operational effectiveness, including coordination of forces, mobilization of the public, cooptation of the poor urban youth as a sector (military aged males), political issue exploitation and dominance, propaganda, weapons procurement, and rapid deployment and disposition of forces to secure points in Santo Domingo (CIA, Communism in the Dominican Republic, July 19, 1965). This operational art became glaringly evident during the April Revolution when the fragmented loyalist forces of General Wessin conducted limited ground operations and relied on aerial attacks on paramilitary units and rebel strongholds led by the Communists.

An example of the advanced operational art of the Communist guerrilla forces involved its exfiltration of some of its personnel to areas outside the city and in rural areas during the attacks on its positions in Santo Domingo. The ability to dispose its forces to secure positions postured for future operations is highly complex strategic, operational, and tactical insurgent activity occurring under limiting factors (LIMFACS) including combat conditions, fluid population movements, disintegrating rebel forces, and depleted logistics. The CIA noted appropriately:

It is also apparent that the Communists are looking toward the future and to a time when they might not have as great a leverage on a Dominican government as they now have on Caamano's. They have been exfiltrating men out of the rebel stronghold in downtown Santo Domingo since early in the month. They have also been moving into the countryside, taking small quantities of weapons with them, reconnoitering for suitable guerrilla bases and, in general, lying low and waiting. In short, they are making sure that

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they do not have all their eggs in the Caamano basket (CIA, The Communist Role in the Dominican Rebel Movement, 16-27 May 1965).

Among the more effective operational outcomes for the Communists in the Dominican Republic involved the training, creation, and deployment of highly dedicated Communist leaders who not only performed effectively during the crisis but also took operational control of the uprising. This personnel advantage was a major strategic factor Marxist revolutionaries exploited well. “The Communists, in short, upheld the rebel resistance when it would have completely collapsed. This is what they are unlikely to permit the non-Communist rebel leaders to forget,” CIA reporting assessed (CIA, The Communist Role in the Dominican Rebel Movement, 16-27 May 1965).

These insurgent leaders took control of the “rebellion” by their military skills, influence over the population, political maneuvering, and their sheer tenacity. The fact that they were relatively few in number created a public debate over their influence over the fighting as well as the degree of Communist complicity. The Johnson administration wisely measured influence rather than numbers to determine the threat level and therefore necessity of intervention (Johnson, Vantage Point, 1971, p.p. 198-200).

Intelligence reporting on the weaknesses of government and military institutions—particularly the latter for operational and short-term consideration for the crisis--in the Dominican Republic further heightened tensions among American political and security leaders, including President Johnson, and contributed to the decision to intervene. These reports underscored corruption, compromise, incapacity, and division among the “loyalist forces.” The loyalists were deeply divided: some immediately joining General Wessin’s forces, others

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hesitating and creating operational incapacities, and many among the ranks opposing the support of Reid's government while calling for the rule of a military junta (CIA, Communism in the Dominican Republic, July 19, 1965, p.p. 8-9).

Critical to these information streams flowing into the Chief Executive's office was the U.S. Country Team operating in the Dominican Republic. This team that the President admittedly relied on for intelligence was "made up of nine men—one from the Army, Navy, and Air Force, our Ambassador," Johnson recalled (Johnson, Public Papers, May 1965, p.471). They urgently requested intervention due to the imminent collapse of the government. U.S. Ambassador to the Dominican Republic William Bennett, the Team's ranking member, stated pointedly during the crisis:

Breakdown of all government authority and possibility that remaining forces available to it may soon tire or become physically incapable of maintaining their present position, I recommend serious thought be given in Washington to armed intervention which would go beyond the mere protection of Americans and seek to establish order in this strife-ridden country. All indications point to the fact that if present efforts of forces loyal to the government fail, power will be assumed by groups clearly identified with the Communist Party. If the situation described above comes to pass, my own recommendation and that of country team is that we should intervene to prevent another Cuba from arising out of the ashes of this uncontrollable situation (FRUS, 1964-1968, Vol. XXXII, p.p.85-87).

The weaknesses of the Dominican government and security forces, collapsing in the revolutionary fervor occurring after the military coup, does not belie the significant weaknesses of the Communist forces during the period. Communist support in urban areas and among the

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youth was considerable but population support in rural areas was far less fervent, trained, and organized (CIA, Security Conditions in the Dominican Republic, June 23, 1966). The Communist organizations excelled operationally during periods of unrest—created or exploited—but could not sustain their forces for longer durations or transition them to permanent area, state, or military control.

Although the three Communist parties operated effectively together during the Dominican Crisis of 1965 they did far less effectively during periods of stability and never achieved a United Front strategy. These population, operational, and organizational problems of the Communists in the Dominican Republic remained long after the conflict and evidenced wider problems of the entire Communist movement in Latin America (CIA, Security Conditions in the Dominican Republic, June 23, 1966).

Moreover, these insurgents were particularly vulnerable to aerial attacks—a fact demonstrated not only during the April Revolution but also during the 1963 uprising when the Dominican government effectively attacked and surprised the rural guerrilla bases, destroying these sanctuaries as well as adversary momentum and potential population support (CIA, Guerrilla Activity in the Dominican Republic, December 9, 1963). Given these weaknesses of Communist forces, denying them the opportunities of exploiting a crisis and ensuing government collapse essentially denied them their window of opportunity to seize control of the country.

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President Lyndon Johnson Meeting During the Dominican Crisis, 1965

### The Consequences of a Successful Intervention

The U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic, 1965, achieved its objective of evacuating American citizens and foreign nationals, providing emergency and humanitarian aid, stabilizing the government, and strategically, preventing a Communist takeover of the country and promoting a return to electoral politics. Additionally, population aversion to conflict experienced in the Dominican Civil War caused the Communist organizations and their revolutionary agenda to become increasingly unpopular (a sentiment shared throughout Latin America in the later 1960s) (CIA, Security Conditions in the Dominican Republic, June 23, 1966).

Dominican Republic security services increased their capabilities marginally, and Constitutional parties returned with increased support and assertiveness. Joaquín Balaguer emerged as an independent political leader becoming President of the country in 1966 and



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presiding for twelve consecutive years of relative stability, economic development, and social progress.

Now, I don't always know what's right. Sometimes I take other people's judgments, and I get misled. Like sending troops in there to Santo Domingo. But the man who misled me was Lyndon Johnson, nobody else. I did that. I can't blame a damn human, and I don't want any of them to take credit for it. [Fortas laughs] And I'll ride it out. I think it's a ... I'd do the same thing right this second if I got a wire from Ambassador Sanchez, by God. (Lyndon Johnson in David Coleman, ed., National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 513. Tape No. 10, May 23, 1965).

Yet, as the above quote illustrates from President Johnson's private conversations less than a month after the decision to intervene: the choice was not easy and created doubts on the matter even though he asserted he would do it again. The loss of U.S. servicemen, negative international press, increasing instability, and regional spike of anti-Americanism in Latin America were significant short-term consequences of intervention with major security benefits occurring gradually. Domestic political opponents such as Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy opposed the President's intervention, the latter making the issue a major political point to discredit his leadership and potential presidential bid in 1968 (CIA, Senator Eugene McCarthy Statement Excerpts, November 17, 1965).

Additionally, structural problems economically, socially, and politically persisted in the Dominican Republic well after the intervention. Communist capabilities to incite riots, manipulate crowds and create unrest and mass destruction of areas, conduct assassinations, target police forces for killing, and subvert key political, security, economic, and social sectors were

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significant and remained longer-term threats lasting years beyond the Dominican Crisis of 1965. CIA reporting prior to Vice President Humphrey's visit to the Dominican Republic in July 1966 warned about the "fragile equilibrium" of the political systems and threats of well-armed extremists and Leftist having "acquired seasoning under fire and specialized urban terrorist techniques. . . ." (CIA, Security Conditions in the Dominican Republic, June 23, 1966).

President Johnson's decision to send troops to the Dominican Republic therefore relied much on sound policy for the region and that country, a policy asserting U.S. security interests shaped by lessons learned from the Communist takeover of Cuba and the ensuing regional dangers created by its exporting of revolution. Johnson's tactical insightfulness regarding critical political, economic, and social conditions, key tactics of the Communists, and the eroding capabilities of government and security organizations were also a major variables in the decision to intervene.

The lessons learned from the U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic 1965 call attention to the fact that sound policy should be refined in the crucible of U.S. security interests, regional experience such as circumstances of the Communist revolution in Cuba, keen understanding of local conditions, and attention to strategic tactics of the enemy, in this case the Dominican Communist organizations and their radicalized supporters highly-trained in Cuba in the art of guerrilla warfare and subversion. The lessons learned from the U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic 1965 should also include a realistic expectation of the consequences of successful operations and the difficulty of the decision-making process, emotionally and procedurally, at all levels of operations including the strategic level of the Commander-in-Chief.

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